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For more information contact:
Geoff Tyree, (509) 372-1145

Hanford Officials Tracking Past Tank Leaks

RICHLAND, Wash. - Hanford crews are drilling in the ground near the site's oldest radioactive waste tanks to find out where and how fast contamination from past leaks is moving.

The sampling effort is part of a larger project to characterize the contamination under Hanford's aging single-shell tanks.

In the past, 67 of Hanford's 149 single-shell tanks have leaked or are assumed to have leaked about one million gallons of highly radioactive and hazardous waste into the ground. There is evidence the contamination has impacted the groundwater. There are concerns the contamination could eventually reach the nearby Columbia River.

Working for the Department of Energy's Office of River Protection, tank farm contractor CH2M HILL Hanford Group drilled a hole near Tank B-110 down to groundwater, about 260 feet below the surface, taking soil samples along the way. Tank B-110 is one of the first tanks built in the 1940s. The tank leaked an estimated 10,000 gallons before it had its retrievable liquid removed in 1984.

"Information from the sampling is important for getting a better picture of how the radioactive and hazardous contaminants are moving under this tank," said Rick Raymond, CH2M HILL Hanford Group vice president of projects. "And it's part of a larger project to find out where the contaminants are under tanks that have leaked, where the contaminants are going, and how fast they are moving."

The sampling is part of a Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, or RCRA, corrective action program, established in 1998 with input from Hanford regulators, Tribal Nations and stakeholders. The program has been following a step-by-step plan to characterize the contamination below tanks that had prior leaks.

"We're already moving liquid waste from the older tanks to newer double-shelled tanks to prevent future leaks," said Raymond. "This sampling will help us figure out how to slow down the movement of this contamination toward the groundwater below."

The sampling project in the B Tank Farm was completed in June. In March, sampling was conducted in the BX Tank Farm. Last summer, samples were taken in the S Tank Farm and the SX Tank Farm, one of the most contaminated sites at Hanford.

Results from all of the sampling projects will help Hanford officials determine how contaminants move through the soil and what, if any, interim or long-term corrective measures are required to slow the migration of contamination to the groundwater.

CH2M HILL's work to learn more about the contaminants in the soil beneath the tank farms is a core project in a site-wide program called the Groundwater/Vadose Zone Integration Project, led by Bechtel Hanford, Inc. and its Environmental Restoration Contractor team. Regulators and the U.S. Department of Energy will make cleanup decisions based on the technical capabilities and scientific information gathered and developed during the course of the Integration Project. Its goal is to assist in protecting the Columbia River from Hanford's radioactive and chemical contaminants.

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Note: Video footage of the drilling activity is available.

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